



4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
May 1, 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You recently received documents (an Environmental Assessment and a Draft Grazing Management Plan) relating to the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposal to graze a portion of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA).

No modifications were made in the documents you received after the public review period. Please consider your previous copies of the Environmental Assessment and Draft Management Plan along with the stipulations of this Decision Notice as final.

Comments received regarding the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area Proposal are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. No changes have been made to the draft Environmental Analysis after consideration of public input. It is my recommendation to move forward with the proposed grazing system on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area.

Thank you very much for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

DECISION NOTICE

BEARTOOTH WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA Polloch Meadows Grazing Proposal

Prepared by Region 4 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. May 4, 2006.

PROPOSAL

The proposal is to seasonally graze a portion of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA), locally known as "Polloch Meadows". This single pasture, six year grazing system consists of approximately 450 acres located near upper Cottonwood Creek within the BTWMA. The 450-acre pasture is to be grazed 4-6 weeks in spring 2006, fall 2007, spring 2009 and fall 2010. The pasture will be totally rested from livestock grazing in 2008 and 2011.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Beartooth Wildlife Management Area Grazing Proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment.

A 30-day public comment period ran from April 1, 2006 through April 30, 2006. Public notices of the proposed action were placed on the FWP web site and were announced in a news release to the area newspaper (Great Falls). The draft Polloch Meadows Grazing Proposal and Environmental Assessment were made available to the public on the FWP website. Hard copies of these two documents were available at the FWP area office in Great Falls, and were offered via mail to anyone requesting them.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Solicitation of public input resulted in receipt of 5 comments. Comments were received as 1 letter and 4 e-mail responses. These 5 responses came from 1 organized group letter (13 individuals) and the remainder from 4 private individuals. Following are questions and salient points made in those responses with added FWP response:

1 - One individual mentioned ranchers and outfitters have figured out how to keep elk on their property during hunting season and that elk eat ranch grass until they are allowed to enter the game range after the season is over. Now the ranchers want to use the game range grass to feed their cattle during the summer. *FWP recognizes the elk usage of neighboring private lands throughout the year and the importance of private lands in proper elk management in the area. The BTWMA was purchased in 1970 primarily for big game winter range as migrating elk move from neighboring private lands to the BTWMA during winter months. As spring approaches, elk again disperse to neighboring private lands. The BTWMA (Hunting District 455) is managed as part of the Devil's Kitchen Elk Management Unit (EMU) according to FWP's Elk Management Plan, which consists of Hunting Districts (HD's) 445 and 455. Habitats on the BTWMA are managed primarily for big game species, especially for resident and migrating animals during winter months. Neighboring landowners were solicited by FWP to manipulate the vegetation in Polloch Meadows through a grazing system as described in the Draft Grazing Management Plan and Draft Environmental Assessment. The purpose of the grazing plan is to increase*

attractiveness of Polloch Meadows to big game, especially elk, by manipulating vegetation conditions and availability.

2 - One individual mentioned grazing was a good idea, although if the electric fence is not effective, the lease should be terminated and the BTWMA shouldn't be turned into a private pasture for Sieben Live Stock. *FWP recognizes the need for an effective fence in a grazing system. The proposed grazing system in Polloch Meadows calls for a single strand electric fence, which has been utilized at many of FWP's WMA grazing systems with good success. Sieben Live Stock is the only neighbor who had the number of cattle available for the specific time requested by FWP for the Polloch Meadows grazing system. Other neighbors have been solicited over the years for grazing practices on the BTWMA. Sieben Live Stock, due to their close proximity to the BTWMA, management flexibility, available cattle numbers, past and present hunting access and personnel to implement the grazing system, was the logical choice for the lessee. Sieben Live Stock also has 16,480 acres of their property enrolled in a 3-pasture, 21,440-acre grazing system with the BTWMA.*

3 - One individual commented that the plan only benefits rich landowners who do not allow public hunting and the monthly fee is very low compared to other private property. The individual also mentioned that the lessee would use permanent fence and suggested conducting seasonal burns and replanting of native grasses instead of using cattle. Another individual mentioned having the lessee remove all fence utilized in the grazing system. *FWP chose to use Sieben Live Stock as the lessee for reasons mentioned in the response to the previous comment. Sieben Live Stock does allow public hunting and is enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program. Currently, the FWP Commission has not established criteria that grazing system lessees must be required to allow public hunting, although the lessee (Sieben Live Stock) in this proposal does. The grazing proposal calls for the use of single strand electric fence that must be installed and removed immediately before/after each season of use. The lower cost per AUM in this particular grazing lease is the same price charged as the 21,440-acre grazing lease on the Beartooth/Sieben Live Stock grazing system. Logistics and lessee participation in fence erection, maintenance and removal, cattle numbers required and the short-term nature of the grazing practice justify the expected lease fee. Reseeding of Polloch meadows is not particularly feasible due to its location, but has been, and will continue to be considered. The proposed area is approximately 15 miles from Wolf Creek to the BTWMA headquarters and then another 5 miles of non-maintained two track to the meadow area. FWP does not have equipment available on-site to conduct such manipulations. Finding an interested contractor for disking and reseeding the site has not been successful. An attempt to hay and/or reseed other remnant fields around the headquarters and lower portions of the WMA in the late 1990's revealed very little interest from cooperators.*

4 - A letter of opposition to the grazing proposal signed by 13 individuals included the following comments: Cattle should be curtailed on the BTWMA until the level of hunter opportunity is equal to, or exceeds, pre-1994 permit levels. Controlled burning is a viable alternative to grazing. If grazing is deemed necessary, grazing permits should be put out for bids. *FWP recognizes that the permit numbers on the BTWMA are not that of pre-1994. This is by design due to the lower elk numbers in the Devil's Kitchen EMU (HD's 445/455) as mentioned in response to comment number one. The objective number of elk wintering on the BTWMA (HD 455) is 1,500 and approximately 800 on the neighboring private lands (HD 445). The total objective number of elk in the EMU is 2,300. Due to high antlerless permit numbers on the BTWMA during the early 1990's and the increased antlerless harvest on neighboring private lands, elk numbers declined in the EMU in the late 1990's. This reduction was prescribed, in part due to the impacts of elk usage of private lands after the 1990 wildfire on the BTWMA. Of*

recent years, by design, the number of antlerless permits on the WMA has been reduced, coupled with minimal antlerless hunting pressure on neighboring private lands, to allow elk numbers to increase to objective levels. As mentioned, a 21,440-acre grazing system on the BTWMA and Sieben Live Stock has been in place since 1992, indicating elk and cattle can effectively co-exist, resulting in elk usage of all landscapes involved. Controlled burning can be an alternative to grazing, although public comment opposing fire on public lands has been overwhelming in other areas. Logistics for fire and control of fire in Polloch Meadows also raises concerns amongst neighboring landowners. This particular grazing proposal was not required to go through a bidding process due to the following: Sieben Live Stock is the only neighbor who had the number of cattle available for the specific time requested by FWP for the Polloch Meadows grazing system. Other neighbors have been solicited over the years for grazing practices on the BTWMA. Sieben Live Stock, due to their close proximity to the BTWMA, management flexibility, available cattle numbers, past and present hunting access and personnel to implement the grazing system, was the logical choice for the lessee.

STIPULATION OF THIS RECORD OF DECISION DOCUMENT

None.

MODIFICATIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

No modifications to the EA or the Management Plan are recommended.

DECISION

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis, Management Plan and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Given results of FWP's analysis coupled with the nature of the public comment, acceptance of this grazing proposal on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area is warranted. After review of this proposal and the corresponding public support and comment, it is my recommendation that FWP proceed with the grazing proposal of Polloch Meadows on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area.

Signed,

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

BTWMA EA Decision Notice Mailing List

Bill Service

2811 Parkview Dr. South
Great Falls, MT 59405

Steve Wadsworth

2212 9th Ave. South
Great Falls, MT 59405

Mark Himmel

4401 Flood Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59404

Dennis Peppenger

2909 Wells Fargo Drive
Great Falls, MT 59404

Stan Peck

2295 Old US Hwy 91
Cascade, MT 59421